3. Work plan, timeline, and future external funding

The New Frontiers Grant would enable me to begin this project full time in the summer before the one-semester (at least) sabbatical that I plan to take in the fall of 2014. During most of the summer, I will pursue library research, drawing primarily on the world-class resources at the University of Notre Dame, to which I am fortunate to live in close proximity. In July, I will attend the biannual conference of the New Chaucer Society. I will be delivering a paper at this conference directly related to this project, attend relevant paper sessions, and get formal and informal feedback on the project from colleagues and potential publishers.

In the fall during my sabbatical, I will continue my research. I have applied for a number of external fellowships (ACLS, Guggenheim, National Humanities Center, etc.), with the aim of securing funding to take a full sabbatical year. If I am successful, I will begin drafting the typescript during the spring, while continuing to pursue research, and I will then take the course release portion of the New Frontiers Grant in the fall of 2015, with the hope of completing a typescript of the monograph by the end of the calendar year. If I am not successful in securing external funding, I will use the course release in the spring of 2015 and aim to complete my research then in order to begin working on the typescript in the summer, with the hope of completing a typescript by the following summer.

BUDGET JUSTIFICATION

My budget has three line items, the justifications of which are the following:

1. **Travel – Travel to Reykjavik for the New Chaucer Society Meeting -- $3970**

   The New Chaucer Society (NCS) is the scholarly society devoted to the study of late medieval British literature. As mentioned above, the NCS’s biannual conference will occur in July, 2014 in Reykjavik, Iceland, and is integral to the pursuit of this project.

   The amount requested for travel is an estimate that breaks down as follows:

   - **Airfare** $1200
   - **Lodging** $1146 (6 nights @ $191/night US State Dept rate)
   - **Meals** $924 (7 days @ 132/day US State Dept rate)
   - **Registration** $500
   - **Parking and other transportation** $200

2. **Summer Academic Support -- $10,000 ($7804 salary, $2196 fringe at 28.14% summer rate)**

   Explanatory note: the original project budget included unallowable items, noted during review committee discussion. A "rapid resubmit" was requested.
This amount pays me, the sole researcher on this project, a summer stipend (8 weeks at $1250/week), which will enable me to devote full time to the project.

3. **Course Release** – $3622 ($2520 salary, $1102 fringe at 43.72% academic year rate)

This amount will enable me to take a course release either in spring 2015 or fall 2105 so as to continue work on the project as described above. The $2520 amount is the department’s current PhD adjunct rate.

**TOTAL AMOUNT REQUESTED: $17,592**
Valuing Middle English Literature across the Divide

1. **Background and significance of the project**

   In the general field of literary study today, a division exists in respect to the role that literary value ought to have—if any—in scholarship. Alternately a subject evoking caustic skepticism or passionate advocacy (sometimes, on different occasions, even from the same scholar), the question of the critical applicability of literary value is among the most contentious issues in the discipline. Yet, in fact, ever since the academic institutionalization of literary study in the nineteenth century, literary value has in some fashion been troubling. On the one hand, that some literary texts appear to possess great value—or, more categorically, that some texts, inasmuch as they are literary, appear to be valuable—has been central to the field’s rationale, underwriting its own claims of value to society. But on the other hand, the reasons why one literary text is more valuable than another, or why a text may necessarily be called literary and hence valuable, have been notoriously difficult to formulate in ways that do not seem impressionistic, tautological, or strangely distant from the phenomenon that we commonly call literature. Over the duration of its existence, the field has negotiated this difficulty in various ways; what lies behind the present contentiousness is that in the last decades of the twentieth century it did so in the particularly radical manner of severely demoting, if not outright eliminating, literary value as a scholarly consideration. Demystified in the 1970s as inherently relative, ideological, and instrumental, literary value by the 1980s became a highly suspect category and was consequently cast aside by many in favor of culture or history as one’s ultimate object of study. Not surprisingly, then, for a variety of reasons—and perhaps most simply because academic departments of literature remained the home for most of this work—a countertrend has emerged that has called for a recentering of literature in the field and hence a reconsideration of the role of literary value. Although diverse in its approaches and its aims, and (with a few exceptions) not wishing simply to turn the literary critical clock back, this scholarship (some of which has adopted the labels New Formalist or New Aestheticist) has taken the view that the demystification of literary value has been misguided and indeed perhaps harmful to the public profile of the discipline. In response, other scholars have viewed these new considerations of literary value skeptically, as essentialism or impressionism cleverly cloaked in theoretical armature. The project that I am proposing seeks to bridge this disciplinary fault line by developing a new approach to literary value that serves as a complement to both critical orientations.

2. **Goals and potential impact on the field**

   My approach’s point of departure is the simple, pragmatic principle that an activity of valuing conditions any recognition of a literary quality; with this assumption it thereby puts to the side, initially, questions of what the nature of literary value may be, whether essentially or in any specific historical formation. Its emphasis is instead on the social yet transhistorical fact that people do value literature (and have for a very long time), and they do so for a variety of reasons. Drawing on a diverse set of thinkers (including Georg Simmel, Bruno Latour, Barbara Hernstein Smith, Terry Eagleton, and Jan Mukařovský), this approach argues that people value literature always in dynamic relation to other valuing actors (to adapt Latour’s term), and thus that any individual activity of valuing occurs within a network of valuing actors that both enables and constrains the character of that activity. The aim of this approach will be to define the character
of the actual valuing activity of a particular actor by following the traces of mediations from that actor to those other actors most proximate in the network of valuing. In doing so, the approach will align with New Aestheticism in the central importance it gives to literary value and at the same time with a cultural history orientation in its interest in the manner in which value emerges through historically specific interactions with other valuing actors.

Moreover, this approach will provide a common framework for a variety of potential projects, depending on which particular actor one chooses as one’s anchor point in the network. Hence, for example, one project might take a non-human actor, such as an edition of Geoffrey Chaucer’s poetry, and investigate the relations of its material ascriptions of value to the proximate actors of editors, buyers, publishers, students, etc. Such a project might resemble some of the current work pursued under the rubric of book history, and indeed one of the benefits of my approach is that it will link such work to (that is, provide a common vocabulary for) what may seem quite different studies, such as those of the influence of particular Chaucer critics or schools of criticism (in which the latter would be understood as value ascribing actors). Indeed, my approach will help us see how all these studies are practically interconnected.

For the present proposed project, I will in a sense return to the traditional starting point of literary criticism, taking the author who elects to write what he or she considers to be a literary text as my network anchor point, as the actor whose initial and sustained ascriptions of literary value to his or her own writing have a special role in that they bring that text into existence. I will examine how these ascriptions occur in conversation with those of proximate actors in the network (e.g., of scribes, contemporary and past authors, patrons, prospective audiences, etc.), and how in doing so they also engage with enabling and competing values of other kinds (e.g., spiritual, socioeconomic) that are prominent within this network—or, more precisely, within the immediate portion of the network and its institutional articulations, which I call an author’s axiological environment. Because authors, more so than other actors, leave traces of their value ascriptions in the literary objects themselves, my aim is, in effect, to unearth these traces. Examining biographical, religious, social, and economic historical materials—as well as the intertexts signaled in the literary work—I will recompose the author’s axiological environment, and in this way reconnect the work back to the network of value to which it testifies. Since a literary text may only come into being through its author’s activity of valuing it, this reconnection will deepen our understanding of the text’s meaning and significance. Furthermore, it will illuminate the continuities and discontinuities between the author’s apprehension of literary value and our own, and hence serve as a means to reflect on the value investments undergirding our critical practices even as we perform them.

More specifically, with the support of a New Frontiers Grant I will conduct the research for and write a book-length study that focuses on key moments of authorial valuing in Chaucer’s *House of Fame* and *Canterbury Tales*, William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, John Lydgate’s *Life of Our Lady*, and John Audelay’s collection of poems in Bodleian Library MS Douce 302. As is well known, in the period covered by these texts (approximately 1360 to 1426) three intersecting historical trends put especial focus and pressure on the value of English literature. Most famously, over these sixty-some years poetry in English developed from a culturally demoted post-Conquest discourse at best infrequently recognized as literary (in Eagleton’s sense of “highly valued writing”) to one quite self-conscious of itself as competing on a lofty cultural plain with literature in Latin and French. At the same time, in the aftermath of the Great Plague there was much public scrutiny of the value of various forms of masculine labor, scrutiny which had social, spiritual, political, and economic dimensions. Finally, more narrowly within the
literate community there was growing scrutiny of the spiritual value of writing in the vernacular, as prompted by the excitement and anxiety stemming from Wycliffism and the Lollards. Hence, the self-ascriptions of literary value of my chosen authors were particularly conversant with unsettled convolutions of socioeconomic and spiritual values, which for them alternately both competed with and underwrote literary value.

In considering these relations of value, my book will trace two lines of influence across the fourteenth/fifteenth-century divide, from Ricardian to Lancastrian England. While I will elucidate the distinct character of each author’s value ascriptions—especially in how these ascriptions engage socioeconomic, occupational, and spiritual values—I will also show how they share certain features and group into pairs, with Lydgate’s and Audelay’s ascriptions respectively respondent in striking ways to Chaucer’s and Langland’s. Among these authors, Langland has benefited from the most scholarship on this general topic, and thus my chapter on *Piers Plowman* will seek to recast this scholarship within the terms of my framework in order to form points of comparison with the value ascriptions of the other authors. In contrast, because (relative to Langland) less work in this regard has been done on Chaucer, and simply because of Chaucer’s literary historical importance, I will devote a pair of chapters to his poetry, and then one chapter each to Lydgate and Audelay. Altogether, the book will provide a portrait of a key set of interrelated authorial literary value ascriptions that emerged in the period in which English literature, as a continuous tradition, finds its origin. By tracking these ascriptions across two generations, the study will combine a multidisciplinary, synchronic exploration of specific axiological environments with a diachronic one of the transhistorical network of valuing. And since the latter network ultimately includes us, the study will, in the end, cast into comparative relief the character of our present ascriptions of value to these texts.

I provide below a chapter outline that delineates the structure of the book in more detail, but an initial example of the kind of analysis that I am proposing may help clarify my approach. In the second Chaucer chapter, I will consider (among other things) the meditation on literary value and socioeconomic identity that Chaucer develops in Fragments IV and V of the *Canterbury Tales*. As I have shown in a recent publication, manuscript evidence makes plain that these are not in fact two fragments but a tightly integrated sequence of four tales. In this sequence, competing ideas about literary value are articulated from the vantage points of the social identities represented by each of the tellers (Clerk, Merchant, Squire, and Franklin). Each tale thereby defines literary value in relation to other kinds of value integral to its teller’s social identity, and the latter three tales develop their definitions in response— to varying degrees antagonistic—to those of the preceding tales. The result is a shifting, dynamic meditation on the relations between particular ascriptions of literary value and the values that they may serve or compete with—a meditation that, moreover, reaches directly into Chaucer’s own axiological environment though the potent biographical resonance of each of the four social identities in this sequence: for Chaucer was a squire, his father was a merchant, he resembled the Franklin at the time he was writing the *Tales*, and, though not technically a clerk, he held clerkly jobs and represented himself, in such earlier authorial self-fashioning efforts as the *House of Fame*, as clerk-like. This four-tale meditation is thus also a reflection on an array of ascriptions of literary value as they have emerged in relation to other values deeply relevant to Chaucer’s life experience. As such, it dramatizes in a particularly extensive, vexed, acutely self-conscious fashion Chaucer’s activity of valuing the *Tales* itself. Here is the full chapter outline:
I. An introduction that will define my critical approach, relate it to broader movements in the field of literary study generally, and explain its particular application to my chosen authors.

II. A chapter on *Piers Plowman* that will examine Langland’s ubiquitous concern with literary value, specifically in its engagement with socioeconomic and spiritual value, that builds especially on the scholarship of Anne Middleton, James Simpson, Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, and Vance Smith.

III. Two chapters on Chaucer:
   a. A chapter on the *House Fame* that will locate Chaucer’s self-reflexive concern with literary value near the beginning of his career, as he seeks reconciliation between the value of literature and the values of socioeconomic occupation.
   b. A chapter on the *Canterbury Tales* broken into three sections:
      i. An introductory section that I will discuss how the framework of a tale-telling contest introduced in the General Prologue prospects a work in which literary value is serially—but inconsistently, dialogically, and agonistically—assigned and defended in respect to a variety of different axiological environments, as refracted through the lenses of the pilgrims’ occupations.
      ii. A second section that will analyze the four-tale sequence of Fragments IV and V as an especially complex realization of the dynamic meditation on value prospected by the General Prologue.
      iii. A short, concluding section that will take up the competition between literary value and spiritual value in the *Tales* as this comes to a head in the Parson’s Prologue and the Retraction.

IV. A chapter on Lydgate that, in defining the character of Lydgate’s ascriptions of literary value in the *Life of Our Lady*, will explore how that poem engages spiritual, political, and socioeconomic values it its project of also establishing a distinct English literary high style.

V. A chapter on Audelay that will delineate the axiological agon that lurks under the surface of the set of devotional poems that he authored, collected, and organized, exploring how Audelay’s self-referential ascriptions of value to his poetry respond in particular to those of *Piers Plowman*.

VI. A conclusion that will first summarize the overall character of literary value ascription in the period of these authors, accounting for both its variety and its continuities, and then consider this character in comparison with the value ascriptions of twenty-first century readers of these texts.

3. **Work plan, timeline, and future external funding**

The New Frontiers Grant would enable me to take a year-long research sabbatical. About half of this time I would devote to library research, drawing primarily on the world-class resources at the University of Notre Dame, to which I am fortunate to live in close proximity. The remainder of the time I would devote to writing the proposed study, obtaining feedback on portions of it by presenting papers at such venues as the Modern Language Association convention and the International Congress of Medieval Studies.

I expect to have close to a complete typescript finished by the end of the sabbatical year. Further funding to complete and revise the typescript may come from a NEH summer stipend or from an ACLS fellowship.
Reviewer: 1  
Rating: ___3 (of 4)

Strengths:  
1. The critical approach behind the project is well articulated and seems to be relevant in the current discourse.  
2. The faculty member has a history of producing well-received essays in important journals and has published a book by Cambridge University Press.  
3. The book outline seems well considered and thoughtful.

Weaknesses:  
1. Might be overly ambitious in time frame.

Reviewer: 2  
Rating: ____4 (of 4)

Strengths: In his/her proposed project, ___ tackles a question of immense importance in literary studies: the value of literature as such. As he/she points out in his/her proposal, this is anything but a new question. Yet, with the turn to New Historicism and “high, usually French, theory” in the 80s, the notion of literary value was shunted to the sidelines. This concern has catapulted to the foreground of literary studies today. Importantly, ___’s study does not remain at the level of pure theory, but he/she engages fully with Chaucer and his late medieval world. ___ has an excellent record of accomplishments, including a first book published with Cambridge and articles appearing in top journals. I have no doubt that he/she will complete this book project in a timely fashion.

Weaknesses: Somewhat ambitious with his/her timeline.

Reviewer: 3  
Rating: ___3.8 (of 4)

Strengths:  
• Well written and persuasive proposal  
• Applicant’s scholarly record and potential suggests project will be completed and promises to impact the field of literary studies  
• Innovative and refreshing re-reading of the classics
Weaknesses:

- Timeline seems overly ambitious

*OUTCOME:* During discussion, committee members questioned the necessity of travel to Iceland for the successful completion of the project. Lacking sufficient evidence, funding was reduced accordingly. Final award amount: $14,000.